

NEWS

KEYNOTE CONVENTION SPEAKER

Esty praises gay rights group for improving tolerance

By Steven Kuhlmann
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WASHINGTON — Rep. Elizabeth Esty, D-Conn., received a rousing welcome at the PFLAG National convention Friday when she delivered the keynote speech to the organization and recounted her family's work with the advocacy group.

PFLAG, formerly known as Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, has worked to increase public tolerance and understanding for the gay community, which has been the subject "of media caricatures and fear and lack of understanding," Esty said.

The freshman House member noted that her mother, Mitzi Henderson, became active in PFLAG after her son Jamie — Esty's brother — told his family in 1978 that he was gay. Henderson was president of PFLAG from 1992-96 and worked for marriage equality and an end to discrimination in the workplace and in healthcare, Esty said.

The lawmaker said she had become interested in gay rights before her brother's announcement and made her first speech on the topic in high school at the age of 16.

"Now, as you can imagine this is a pretty unusual topic in 1975 in Winona, Minn. — a town where hog and cattle production was a sought-after course they offered at our high school," Esty joked.

That was the start of her career-long advocacy of gay rights.

"In my own improbable path from Supreme Court lawyer working on AIDS policies in the 1990s to PTA mom in the 1990s to the local town council to the State



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U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, D-Conn., delivered the keynote address Friday at the national convention of PFLAG, formerly known as Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. She served as the national president from 1992-96.

House, and last year to Congress, I have worked hard to ensure that I model and support love and respect for all people," she told the PFLAG meeting in the Mayflower Hotel where she received a standing ovation.

Throughout her career, Esty has supported the LGBT community, voting for full marriage equality in 2009 while a member of the Connecticut legislature, co-sponsoring legislation to increase equality and signing the amicus brief to challenge the Defense of Marriage Act in the Supreme Court.

The court overturned DOMA on June 26, a decision that Esty said made her feel proud not only because

it was a victory for those in the LGBT community, but also because her mother had been among those who testified against the law in 1996 before a Senate committee.

"On that day, I felt particularly proud to be Mitzi Henderson's daughter, proud of the contributions she and so many advocates like her and like you have made to our nation's progress towards equality. Progress that is not simply the result of politics — but that is the result of something far more powerful — love," Esty said. "Like all of us, I was overjoyed in June when the court made the historic decision to end DOMA and correct this moral and constitutional injustice."

